

Statement
Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
“In Search of Educational Excellence In The Nation’s Capital: A Review of
Academic Options for Students and Parents in the District of Columbia”

May 9, 2003

Good morning. A quorum being present, the Committee on Government Reform will come to order. Welcome to today’s hearing on academic options for students and parents in the District of Columbia.

The condition of the District of Columbia Public Schools has concerned me since the first day I came to Congress as Chair of the D.C. Subcommittee. While we’ve made strides since then – the D.C. College Access Act, the establishment of charter schools – the quality of educational opportunities in the Nation’s Capital should continue to worry us all.

The ability of DC schools to meet its core goals has been long challenged by financial mismanagement and an array of other issues. Poor academic achievement scores are one clear indicator. Students in the District should expect access to the same quality education as students across the Washington region and elsewhere. According to a U.S. Department of Education report, D.C. spends far more per pupil than Montgomery County, Maryland or Fairfax, Virginia. Unfortunately, the District lags behind in school performance in comparison to other districts. Money, in and of itself, is not the answer.

When a child cannot expect to get her hands on an errorless study guide to prepare for the Stanford 9 exam, I am concerned. When the District claims they need more money but are paying a consultant close to \$300,000 for six months of work to figure out the budget and how many employees they have, I am concerned. When I hear about deteriorating schools, test scores that have not improved and staggering high school dropout rates, I am concerned.

The question before us today is whether District schools are providing what students need to succeed, and if not, what we might be able to do about it. We all want the District's education system to improve. I've visited the schools and seen the conditions under which students are asked to learn. We need to do better.

I've come to the conclusion that parents and students stuck in failing schools need -- no, deserve -- an opportunity to choose from a wider pool. I have received calls from parents who are frustrated, angry, even distraught by the condition of their child's school. It's time to do more than sympathize. This is a moral imperative.

The school choice debate should not be about politics. It should be about an honest appraisal of the state of affairs in our public schools, about offering an alternative for students and parents. What is being proposed is not a mandate but a choice.

These are challenging fiscal times to be sure, but education remains our top priority. In the President's FY 2004 proposed budget, \$756 million has been allocated for school choice programs, with some of that targeted toward a scholarship program in the District. I think we need to ask the question: Wouldn't more choices, funded by new federal dollars, provide a needed alternative for low-income children attending low-performing schools?

Enhancing educational quality in the District is a critical component of maintaining the positive momentum we've seen in recent years under the stewardship of Mayor Williams and the Council. It is our duty to provide resources so that kids can have a bright future. The D.C. school system must be equipped with strategic tools and resources to assure the safety and well being of the city's most vulnerable children.

Congress saw the disparity in opportunity for District residents to attend college compared to other state residents. In 1999, Congress passed the D.C College Access Act, legislation I authored. The act gave District students the right to attend any public college in the United States at an in-state tuition rate, or receive \$2,500 to attend any private college in

the city or region. This has helped defray the tuition expenses of higher education for District of Columbia high school graduates. It has leveled the playing field and brightened the futures of thousands of young adults. Now we need to reach more children, and reach them earlier.

In order to provide greater educational options and innovation within the public school system, the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995 established charter schools in the District.

D.C. Charter Schools are publicly funded but operate independently from the school system. The goal of school choice in the District of Columbia is not subtraction but addition. Public charter schools are a key component of a comprehensive reform strategy. But we need to ask: Are they enough?

Expanded choices would have benefits beyond the primary goal of educating District children better. They can also be an incredible economic development tool. Families flock to areas where schools succeed. They flee areas where schools under-perform. Improving the education system will not only help the District but the entire Washington region as well. To have a healthy region we need to have a healthy city. And nothing is more important to the health and vitality of an area than education.

We have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us. Our witnesses are here because of their commitment to the children in the Nation's Capital. I look forward to hearing testimony from our witnesses. I want to thank the witnesses for sharing their experience and suggestions with us. It is my hope that appropriate legislation involving school choice will be supported by District leaders. I look forward to strengthening communication between key stakeholders.

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